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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO TSUNAMI-HIT ATOLL IN MALDIVES

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ambassador visited badly-damaged atoll in south Maldives. Temporary shelter for those who lost houses is well-planned, with community involvement. Most residents of severely-affected islands are willing to relocate to larger island. Maldives officials insist no one will be forced to move. Reconstruction plan is thorough and detailed. We believe US assistance will be well-spent. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) During early-April visit to Maldives to assess post-tsunami reconstruction programs, GORM arranged for Ambassador to visit Laamu Atoll, about one hundred miles south of Male. Ambassador was escorted on this trip by Ministry of Planning Director Mr. Imaad and by Laamu Atoll Chief Moosa. (NOTE: In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami the U.S. military did extensive relief work in Laamu

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Atoll.)

¶3. (U) Laamu contains two islands--Mundoo and Kalhaidhoo--which suffered severe tsunami damage. GORM hopes to relocate entire population--some 1250 people--of these two islands to the atoll capital of Gaamu. Tour began with visit to temporary shelter sites on Gaamu for Mundoo and Kalhaidhoo inhabitants. Shelters were located in two disused garment factories and housed 200 persons (Mundoo) and 85 persons Kalhaidhoo. In each building, plywood sheets had been used to construct private space for each family. Spaces had doors and locks. Each family unit had a ceiling fan. Space was allocated by size of family. Bathroom facilities were located in each building, and also two washing machines. Residents ate in a communal kitchen. Residents themselves prepared meals, cleaned sanitary facilities, etc. on a rotating schedule. Construction and upgrading of shelters was being carried out, as far as possible, by residents themselves. Most men were not in camp in mid-morning as they had obtained work in Gaamu. Children were bussed to school each day to nearby school. However, they were kept together at school instead of being scattered throughout school community.

¶4. (U) Ambassador was able to interview (through an interpreter) several camp inhabitants. All were satisfied with services they had received. Asked whether they wished to remain in Gaamu in promised new housing or return to their home islands, they said they preferred to stay in Gaamu where services were better. Inhabitants had received psycho-social counseling for two months after the tsunami. (n.b. American Red Cross has provided training in this area.)

¶5. (U) Ambassador then visited Kalhaidhoo Island. Island is situated on east side of atoll and has long sloping beach, which intensified tsunami damage. During tsunami, island was covered with up to 6-7 feet of water, and three people died. Property damage was extensive, with many houses completely destroyed and large heavy water tanks knocked off their bases and carried long distances. Salt water had killed almost all mango, breadfruit and guava trees which residents used for income. Entire population of island was evacuated to Gaamu immediately following tsunami. Those whose houses were relatively intact or who could stay with relatives returned to await final plans for reconstruction.

¶6. (U) Ambassador was able to talk extensively with the island's "Women's Committee," who described their horrific experiences when tsunami hit. (Most men were off fishing.) An energetic discussion about relocation to Gaamu revealed that most if not all wished to relocate if they were given suitable houses and sufficient plots of land. Several expressed their anxieties about moving to a new island, but concluded that, all in all, the promise of a new house and substantially improved services--education, medical, etc.--on Gaamu made them willing to move.

¶7. (U) Imaad and Moosa explained that the decision to completely relocate inhabitants of these two islands was made because the islands were low-lying and subject to periodic flooding, and because of the extensive tsunami damage. On Kalhaidhoo, for instance, 47 percent of the houses were completely destroyed. GORM officials repeated several times that no one would be forced to move; those who wanted to stay on their home islands could remain. Atoll Chief Moosa speculated that "20 to 25 people" might want to stay on each

island. Officials showed detailed reconstruction plans for Gaamu (copies being sent to SA/INS), which included housing, repair of roads, harbors and jetties, schools, power, water and sanitation, etc. Housing has already been pledged by Red Cross. Entire island will have an "Environmental Protection Zone" of 30-40 meters depth from ocean.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The trip provided a micro view at the atoll/island level of tsunami relief and reconstruction efforts in Maldives. Put simply, it was extremely impressive. Relief effort has provided what is needed in an effective fashion, and involvement of affected persons was particularly noticeable. Maldivians we interviewed spoke freely and openly to us, and it is apparent that most had decided that relocation was their best choice. GORM officials were adamant that no one would be forced to relocate. Reconstruction plan is thorough and detailed. Septels will provide macro level reconstruction discussions and recommendations on how to move forward on US assistance. From this micro snapshot, however, we conclude that US assistance through the national fund or some combination of mechanisms will be well-used.

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